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ABSTRACT

This brief addresses the benefits and concerns raised by the use of high stakes testing as the centerpiece of new accountability systems. It offers some recommendations for policymakers seeking to incorporate such tests into state accountability systems. High stakes tests can clarify and establish challenging performance expectations for students, teachers, and schools; highlight achievement gaps; and boost student performance. The drawbacks are that they can: (1) increase student failure and retention rates to unacceptably high levels; (2) narrow the focus of instruction and assessment; (3) lead to inappropriate inferences about student performance; and (4) overburden students and teachers. The question for policymakers is not whether to use high-stakes testing because the trend toward increased reliance on such testing will not and should not disappear any time soon. The question is how best to use high stakes testing, ensuring technical adequacy of the tests, efficient use of testing, and sufficient professional development. (SLD)

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POLICY BRIEF

FEBRUARY 2000

high-stakes testing

the high stakes of HIGH-STAKES testing

More is riding on test performance than ever before. In response to widespread public demand, states are implementing new accountability systems that hold schools, teachers, and students responsible for demonstrating acceptable levels of student achievement.

Centrally featured in these new systems are "high-stakes" tests used to determine a wide range of critical outcomes — which students progress to the next grade level or receive a diploma, which teachers receive bonuses, or whether a school receives rewards or sanctions. The danger with such tests is that states, in their rush to implement comprehensive accountability systems, may use them inappropriately.

This brief addresses both the benefits of and concerns raised by use of high-stakes testing as the centerpiece of new accountability systems. It offers specific recommendations for policymakers seeking to incorporate these tests in state accountability systems.

Benefits: High-Stakes Tests Can . . .

Clarify and Establish Challenging Performance Expectations for Students, Teachers, and Schools

High-stakes testing based on clearly articulated standards provides a clear picture of student performance expectations, constituting a powerful vehicle for holding all students, teachers, and schools to the same challenging standards. Because a number of other industrialized nations (England, Germany, Japan, Singapore) have a long tradition of high-stakes assessments, many policymakers argue that the United States needs to adopt a similar approach to maintain a well-prepared and globally competitive workforce.

Highlight Achievement Gaps

High-stakes tests highlight what is often known but unstated — that significant achievement gaps exist between rich and poor districts and among ethnic and cultural groups. Reporting these data forces local educators to address this widespread problem, especially if the state makes rewards and sanctions to districts and schools conditional on both overall student achievement and achievement by disadvantaged student subgroups. Comparable-improvement requirements, such as those included in California's Public School Accountability Act, compel teachers and administrators to ensure that no group is left out of efforts to achieve enhanced student performance.

In short, states, districts, and schools can use assessment results to determine whether **all** students are mastering key content knowledge and attaining the skills necessary for future success in education and the workforce. Administrators and teachers can pinpoint possible problems and redirect curriculum and instructional activities accordingly.

Benefits, continued from page 1

Boost Student Performance

In many states, high-stakes testing has been accompanied by improved student performance. This result has certainly been the experience of states implementing new high school exit examinations (e.g., New Jersey, Nevada). However, increases in student performance over time require significant support, including providing systematic remedial efforts to students who have previously failed the tests.

Drawbacks: High-Stakes Tests Can . . .

Increase Student Retention and Failure Rates to Unacceptably High Levels

When the consequence of low performance is retention or withholding a graduation diploma, policymakers must consider the immediate effect on students and the impact on society over the long term. If setting "world class" standards results in an unacceptably high failure rate — Virginia's 97% school failure rate in its first year of a new accountability system is an extreme example — policymakers and the general public must question the credibility of such a system. Particular attention must be paid to the impact of high-stakes testing on traditionally underserved student populations (e.g., special education, English language learners, low-income, students of color). For example, in both Texas and Florida failure rates among African American and Latino students increased disproportionately after tests were revised to align with more challenging state standards.

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- Set standards that are high, yet attainable, and then consider systematically raising the performance expectations over time. This approach allows schools and teachers to integrate standards thoroughly into curriculum and instruction and provides students time to learn new concepts and skills before being held fully accountable for their mastery.
- Provide extra help (e.g., summer school, supplemental tutoring, individual attention) for students who fail or are in danger of failing high-stakes tests based on new, higher standards.
- Incorporate alternative, equally rigorous, assessment approaches for assessing students who may be disadvantaged by standardized testing. Performance-based assessments or modifications of procedures for multiple-choice tests (such as providing additional time) should afford students the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the same high standards in ways that are more compatible with their own learning and response styles.

Narrow the Focus of Instruction and Assessment

A hard-to-avoid consequence of high-stakes, large-scale testing is narrowing of curriculum and instruction to meet test specifications. By their nature, it is difficult for large-scale, multiple-choice tests to address important curriculum goals that require generative thinking, sustained effort over time, and effective collaboration. These important skills are better assessed by performance-based assessment methods, such as portfolios, computer simulations, oral

presentations, and projects, which make greater demands on academic foundation, teamwork, and problem-solving skills than traditional paper-and-pencil assessments. Performance-based assessment methods also allow for stronger, more direct links among standards, instructional activities, and assessments. Yet despite the significant strengths associated with performance-based assessment, the vast majority of high-stakes statewide assessment systems still consist of multiple-choice items only or multiple-choice items supplemented with a few open-response items (e.g., essays). Concerns over high costs, potentially controversial content, technical adequacy, and lengthy administration procedures have led many states to avoid incorporating performance-based assessments into a statewide system. Instead, states delegate the development and implementation of performance-based assessments to the local district or school. The danger in this practice is that local schools and teachers may forego these more "authentic" assessment tools, as statewide systems with high-stakes testing become more common and more demanding of teachers' time and efforts.

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- Establish policies — including monetary rewards, increased flexibility in the use of funds, exemptions from regulations — that encourage local districts, schools, and teachers to (1) expand their curriculum beyond the skills covered by the high-stakes component of a statewide student assessment system and (2) incorporate performance-based assessments that reinforce important curriculum goals.

Lead to Inappropriate Inferences about Student Performance

Some high-stakes assessment systems try to create efficiencies by using the same test to serve multiple purposes and draw multiple inferences. This is a questionable practice. For example, many tests that are incorporated into new statewide student assessment systems were designed to assess a student's content knowledge or to assess student achievement relative to a norm group of students at a particular point in time (e.g., Stanford Achievement Test-9, Terra Nova). However, some states are also using these tests to help determine whether schools and teachers should be rewarded or sanctioned — a purpose for which the tests were not designed. Similarly, some states propose using the same instrument both for high school graduation and entry into the state university system, despite the fact that these two testing purposes call for different development and validation strategies.

s o l u t i o n

- Limit the use of assessment instruments to the purposes for which they were designed, or take steps to validate the appropriateness of any new high-stakes uses of a given assessment instrument. The higher the stakes, the greater the need of ensuring that the tests validly predict future success in school or employment, and that implementing high-stakes assessments as part of an accountability system will lead to increased and sustained student learning and better delivery of curricula.

Overburden Teachers and Students

High-stakes tests often become part of a system in which other tests are already in place. States must avoid simply adding more tests at each grade level. Unless the number of tests and frequency of testing are limited, states risk creating a system that seriously overburdens teachers and students, taxing precious instructional time and resources.

Insufficient attention to professional development often exacerbates the burden of high-stakes testing. Despite teachers' essential role in making any assessment system successful, they typically lack rudimentary knowledge about the purposes,

Continues on back page

content, and implementation plan of new high-stakes tests. More alarming, teachers often lack the pedagogical skills and facility with instructional strategies necessary to teach students the challenging content on which many of the newer high-stakes assessment systems are based.

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- Decide which tests are truly necessary, as opposed to desirable. A statewide testing system must allow for comprehensive measurement, without sacrificing significant amounts of time for teaching and learning. The testing burden and responsibilities should be shared across grades within a school, so that neither students nor teachers are excessively taxed in any given grade, and accountability for student performance is spread evenly throughout the system.

- Ensure that teachers receive adequate exposure to and practice with the standards on which assessment is based, learn instructional strategies to help students reach proficiency levels, and receive training to remediate students who initially fail. For a high-stakes assessment system to enhance student achievement, teachers must be active participants in the development and implementation of the system.

The information provided in this brief is based on the work of WestEd's Assessment and Standards Development Services (ASDS) program. ASDS is involved extensively at the local, state, and national levels in designing, implementing, and evaluating new assessment methods and systems. More details regarding an ideal comprehensive statewide K-12 student assessment system will be offered in an upcoming article by the program's directors, this brief's principal authors, Sri Ananda and Stanley Rabinowitz.

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Conclusion

The question for policymakers is not *whether* to use high-stakes testing — the trend toward increased reliance on such testing will not and should not disappear any time soon. Rather the question is *how best* to use high-stakes testing.

An ideal statewide K-12 student assessment system to support school accountability must balance several competing requirements: technical adequacy of the assessment tools and processes (e.g., reliability, validity, absence of bias); efficient use of testing; and clearly established state and local responsibilities for assessment development and implementation. Furthermore, sufficient resources must be provided for professional development of teachers in the use of tests and remediation of students who initially fail. Finally, policymakers must not lose sight that the ultimate goal of a comprehensive accountability system is not to reward or punish, but to improve the delivery of curricula and increase student learning.

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